GREAT EXPECTATIONS

November 30, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"...you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming..."
--Matthew 24:44 (RSV)

Scripture
Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

Irrelevant - "not significant, having no demonstrable bearing upon the matter at hand," Webster defines it. It is the word we fear most. Those of us who regard thoughtfulness as a moral responsibility are sensitive to the common criticism of religion as irrelevant, as having no demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand. We grow accustomed to a kind of permanent defensiveness about it. Actor William Hurt, in a magazine interview recently told how he started out studying theology and switched to theater because, as he put it, "religion doesn't seem to have anything to do with humanity."

Irrelevant... I think we participate in the cultural conclusion that some, if not most, of the stuff that goes on in church is irrelevant, i.e., that it has no demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand. All those Bible stories about people who don't show up in anyone's history books, doing things that are recorded nowhere else and which often contradict the way we know the world operates, not to mention that dreamy, doe-eyed utopianism, that sophomoric naivete, that excessive humanism about - loving enemies and forgiving and, of all things, beating swords into plowshares. What could be more irrelevant.

Throughout Christendom on this Sunday, the first in Advent, the vision of Isaiah is being read to listening Christians:

> **"...and they shall beat their swords**
> **into plowshares**
> **and their spears into pruning hooks,**
> **nation shall not lift up sword against nation**
> **neither shall they learn war any more"**

And I confess to my conclusion that the ultimate irrelevance would be to ignore the events of the week in which listening Christians will confront that text. A week in which we learned that American arms were sold to Iran to sustain a tragic war, and the profits were directed to Nicaragua to sustain another tragic war. I confess to a sense of painful paradox that on the very day the calendar seems to call us to lighten up, there seems to be a conspiracy between history and the word of God, to get our attention, to remind us that the Biblical story is still being written, to show us that if religion is irrelevant it is because we have found it

more comfortable to keep it irrelevant. The only way, I confess, to conclude that this matter has no demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand is simply to refuse to hear the voice of Isaiah, the reading from the Old Testament for the First Sunday in Advent.

It is the most tender and poignant festival of the Christian year. It is the loveliest season. With the beautiful lights and the wonderful music, with bells ringing and children singing and people turning their attention to giving and sharing and celebrating, it is a remarkably human phenomenon. And yet, Advent - for those who attempt to be reflective and honest, is not as satisfying as we think it should be. There is something out of sync it seems. People often wonder and ask why, when the world is so jolly, the church seems so serious? Why, when the world is singing "Jingle Bells," "White Christmas," "Hark the Herald," the church comes up with these obscure old hymns in a minor key?

Part of it, of course, is that the world is getting ready for a party that will happen quite independently of our support or participation. The economy is driven by the Christmas season. Retail business will live or die on the basis of what happens in the next few weeks. In the New York Times business section this morning, a banker whose area is credit cards said: "The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is our Final Exam."

The party is on and part of the reason Advent seems ambiguous theologically and homiletically is that nothing we do is going to compete with Mistletoe Bears and a 40 foot Christmas tree.

But there is another, more important reason - and it has to do with this matter of relevance. From the earliest days the Christian church has wanted to use the weeks prior to Christmas to rehearse some of its basic material: to ponder and celebrate fundamental things, to get serious, theologically speaking. And so while the world is ablaze in light darkness falls in the church for dramatic effect. And while the world is adorned with bright red and festive green - the Church turns to the color purple. And while popular piety eagerly seizes the manger tableau to sell a few more cashmere sweaters, the church starts talking about Israel in exile and the end of history, of all things.

For Christians Advent is the time to ponder the inexplicable, the incredible suggestion that the God of creation is a participant in history, comes into history, is a reality in history - history on a grand scale and history on a modest scale. And that, as you may recognize, contains the fundamental theological/intellectual quandary: does it matter? is it relevant? does it have a bearing on anything?

The fundamental problem has always been relevance, not atheism. Lily Tomlin's wonderful bag lady, Trudy, in The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe, puts it very wisely:

> "One thing I have no worry about it whether
> God exists.
> But it has occurred to me that
> God has Alzheimers and has forgotten
> That we exist."

Likewise, Woody Allen wonders why God seems to be such an underachiever.

Advent is not simply the preparation for the party. It is not the ecclesiastical equivalent of the shopping day countdown. The focus of Advent, as much as we want to look back - to precious traditions, to the birth in a manger - the focus of Advent is future...the coming of the Lord: something that happened once but will happen in the future, happens, in fact, in the present.

So, throughout the Christian world today people are hearing the words of the Bible on the future: St. Matthew and the prophet Isaiah: Swords into plowshares. Isaiah dreamed that dream at least 700 years before Christ, at a time when his nation, Judah, was in the process of forgetting who was the Lord of History and was about to make a series of tragic errors internationally which would cause it unending grief. It was not a likely time to advise anyone to turn a sword into a plow... far better to go out and get a few more swords! The prophet, who is one of the truly remarkable poetic geniuses in all of history, in the middle of some grim circumstances, forges a theology of hope. God is not invested only in the present. God will help change the present into a future which will be more just, more equitable, more peaceful, more gentle. God, this spiritual genius, taught, intends the world to be better and people who believe in God have every reason to be hopeful about the prospect. So for 2,800 years, God's people have not been content with the status quo, and have looked forward in hope to the day of the Lord when these things will happen.

Is that relevant? Is there anything here? Is there anything served by being hopeful about the future - or is it better to be realistic - prepare for the worst and then be pleasantly surprised if it doesn't happen?

Well, we do know - because we have seen it - that hope is powerful: that things change for the better in history because people refuse to give up hope. We do know that people of hope refuse to accept the status quo, whether the topic is nuclear proliferation, welfare injustice, or the AIDS epidemic, what Bob Greene terms the new American Apocalypse, in which we find ourselves. We do know that the people of hope are the ones who will - and are giving their lives to solving the problems that beset us; that the revolutionaries and reformers and do-gooders are terribly important even as they irritate, aggravate and infuriate us precisely because they will not and cannot make peace with the status quo. We do know that nothing becomes an idol faster than the status quo. We do know that the people who have an investment in the way things are, are the last people to be open to change and therefore the first to oppose a new idea and ultimately have the least amount of hope for the future.

We know all that on a cerebral, organizational, political level. It is a lesson that is important to anyone who cares about institutions and the future - whether the institutions are government, business or churches. And we also know about the dynamic on a personal level. We know the power of hope to change things. We know that people who have all hope taken away shrivel up and die. We know that the hope of survival kept people alive in concentration camps. We know that bad things begin to happen when the

patient concludes that there is absolutely no hope. Ministers appreciate the ethical dilemma of physicians at precisely that point; wanting to be as straightforward and honest as possible, yet as healers, loathe to eliminate the powerful ally of hope. Hope is life giving. Hope keeps us alive emotionally and spiritually. Hope keeps us open to all the options. Hope expects great things to happen and then makes them happen. People who are hopeful about the future, who live expectantly, live in a way that actually brings that future into being. Nothing magic about it - it's the power of hope.

We have discovered, tragically, the terrible power of despair which is the opposite of hope.

Everyone agrees, that the ghastly rash of terriorism which has afflicted us is a product of despair - which is the absence of hope. Despair causes people to do irrational, destructive and self-destructive things. Despair, the absence of hope, causes people to immolate themselves and hijack airplanes and kidnap hostages and bomb department stores. Better security will help protect us from that, of course, but everyone who is knowledgeable agrees that the resolution has something to do with hope, with a political and social structure which offers some prospect of a meaningful future to people who have become accustomed to living without hope. Every hostage who returns says it. There will be no end to it, until Palestinian Arabs, for instance, have some hope, a place to live and move and have being, a political structure which promises a future.

We also know this dynamic personally. When there is no hope for us - relationally, when there is no hopeful future, we do unlikely, foolish, self-destructive things. How many homes are broken, do you suppose, because there was no hope for the future, no willingness to work on the future, no openness to growth and change, and one or the other decided to find hope elsewhere? How many creative, lively professionals have become mediocre, don't-rock-the-boat plodders, because someone slammed the door on the future?

The prophetic tradition of our faith is that God is a God of the future, a God of future possibilities, a God who will intercede in the future and open doors and create possibilities. The prophetic tradition expressed in this wonderful dream of Isaiah is that the future is full of hope and that the appropriate religious posture is leaning into the future, in expectancy, anticipation. That's what Advent means. And that's why all over the world people are hearing Isaiah's dream today.

Jesus and his disciples inherited that tradition, that expectancy. The author of the Gospel of Matthew recalls an occasion near the end when Jesus sat down and talked with them about it. At the time classic Jewish doctrine of the future was that God was going to intercede in history, judge all the nations, restore the monarchy of David - under the leadership of an annointed one, a Messiah. But there is a twist to it, as Matthew recalled Jesus' version. There is "new teaching" in Jesus' version... God will come unexpectedly. And so the appropriate posture is to be ready for whatever God does next and not to waste a lot of energy calculating the time, place or precise nature of what God will do.

There is a major difference between what Jesus says in this passage and what many people think he said. Throughout history there have always been Christians who thought they knew when he would return and when the end of history would occur. There have always been folk who believed that God coming into history meant the end rather than the beginning - and so they sold what they had and went out to the mountain to wait for the Second Coming. The quickest way to write a religious best seller is to predict the end of the world and do some creative interpreting of Biblical symbols to make it sound authentic. The man who has done that most successfully has taken the profits from the sale of books which predict the immanent end of the age and invested them in long term real estate speculation. In any event, armed with obscure references to the Babylonian Empire, under Nebuchadnezzar, or the Roman Empire under Nero, modern Christians try to see a predicted sequence of events unfolding in the near East and various political villains as the incarnation of assorted beasts, bears and dragons which inhabit those secret first century apocalyptic visions in the Book of Revelation. Hitler, of course, was a favorite apocalyptic beast. People used to think maybe it was Stalin. Enthusiastic Republicans even used to try FDR and the New Deal and of course, proponents of this new apocalyptic have a field day with the Ayatollah. An irreverent aside - in the Book of Revelation the number 666 is identified with the final beast and the end. Before I realized it one year I had a license plate with 666 on it. Presbyterians don't pay much attention to that sort of thing so I didn't. But the young man who worked at the service station where I traded was a member of a Church that was pretty sure about when the end was coming and who was on what side. And when I would appear at the pump, with my collar on, and 666 on the license plate, he had a major theological crisis on his hands. The advent of "Self-service" resolved it.

In any event, Matthew recalls Jesus teaching his disciples that no one knows how and when God will act: that the time and place are not known: that the task ahead is to live expectantly.

Now candor demands an admission here. The early Christians expected the end. They thought they knew what would happen and when. They were wrong. On that topic, St. Paul was wrong too, someone said, by at least 1,900 years.

The early church had to learn what to do if Jesus didn't return. And when it got around to listening more carefully, it learned the lesson he was trying to teach them anyway, the most important lesson of all - to live expectantly, to live into the future with great expectation.

But is it relevant? When all is said and done - are those ancient dreams of Isaiah anything other than pious pipe dreams? Is there any real reason to be hopeful about the outcome of human history, or our personal history? The Christian answer to that fundamental question, you see, is not a theological argument. The answer is Christmas. What Advent, this season of lovely expectancy, points to is the most unlikely event of all - God's love, expressed in the birth of a baby. Isaiah's dream of swords becoming plowshares is no more naive, outlandish, unrealistic, than this one central event and a claim about it upon which we are ready to bet our lives - and that is that the son of Mary and Joseph, born in Bethlehem, is the incarnation of God, the word made flesh. There weren't many people in

Bethlehem who were ready to believe that either.

The hope, you see, is that God chooses that way to come into history. The hope, as I read it, is not for a glorious consummate Second Coming in the clouds, but the coming of love incarnate into history and into your life and mine: quietly, subtly, in unlikely and unexpected ways.

Art and poetry help when words won't express it fully. Ranier Maria Rilke, in "Letters to a Young Poet", put it provocatively:

> "Why do you not think of Christ as the coming one, immanent from all eternity?...What keeps you from projecting his birth into times that are in process of becoming, and living your life like a painful and beautiful day in the history of a great gestation?" [p49ff - see Davie Napier, Proclamation - 2]

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorites, put it in a way I have found instructive... "Listen to what's happening in your own life...to experiences that somehow, even if you can't say how, seem either to illumine, or to be illumined by, religious truth. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. Listen to your life." [C.C. 11/83]

We turn to the poets when our ordinary language won't do it... "like a thief in the night" is one way to put it... "your life like a painful and beautiful day in the history of a great gestation" is another way... "Listen to your life. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes..." is yet another way of saying "the King is coming: live expectantly, lean into the future with hope, live with the anticipation that Jesus Christ will come into your life with hope and new possibility."

Advent invites us to the nativity, to the birth celebration, and beyond, to the gestation, to the gradual, gentle coming of God into life. Advent invites your participation, your openness to the tugging at your heart, the impulse to join in, not only to the sentiment and tradition, but the loving and forgiving and peacemaking that need to be done in our lives now and in the future. In the middle of it you will, as I will again this year, find tears in your eyes.

You may not know why.... What it is - is the coming of the King, God's love, working through you, using your faith and love and humanity and your hope to be born anew and to create a new tomorrow...

> O come, thou Day - spring
> come and cheer our Spirits
> by thine Advent here.
> Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
> and death's dark shadows
> put to flight.
> Rejoice! Rejoice!
> Emmanuel shall come to thee
> O Israel. Amen.